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Helms: LBJ Knew of CIA Mail Plan

Washington (AP)—Former CIA director Richard Helms testified yesterday that he believes, but cannot prove, that he told President Lyndon Johnson about an illegal CIA mail-opening project.

Appearing before the Senate Intelligence Committee, Helms also disagreed with former postmasters general Edward Day and Winton Blount, who testified earlier that the CIA never told them it was opening one of every 13 letters to and from the Soviet Union. The project covered 20 years.

Helms, now the U.S. ambassador to Iran, also said that to his knowledge Presidents Richard Nixon, Dwight Eisenhower and John Kennedy were not told of the mail opening while they were in office. However, he said he believes that in the spring of 1967, while discussing CIA operations with Johnson, he told him the CIA had been illegally reading the U.S.-Soviet mail since 1953. He said there is no record or memo "to support this belief of mine."

Helms said that despite the testimony of Day, who was postmaster general at the beginning of the Kennedy administration, he stands by a memo he wrote 14 years ago saying that in a briefing by then-CIA director Allen Dulles, "no relevant details were withheld" from Day about the mailing opening. Helms said Blount was shown photographs of the contents of one or more letters.

Committee Chairman Frank Church (D-Idaho) asked Helms to justify a statement in a memo over his signature in which Nixon was told all mail cover operations had been ended. Church said the CIA was opening the mail then and continued to do so even after Nixon had ordered an end to the operation.

"There was no intention to mislead or lie to the President," Helms said. He said the statement was intended to reflect the FBI's position, not that of the CIA.

Church said attempts are being made to secure the testimony of Nixon. He also said former Attorney General John Mitchell will be called to testify. Helms said Mitchell assured him he had no qualms about the value of the mail opening project and had specifically allowed it to continue.

Earlier, both Blount and Day had testified they believe it may be legal for the CIA to open and read the mail of U.S. citizens.

However, another former postmaster general, John Gronouski, said he believes such openings are against the law. He said the only reason he didn't stop the operation when he was in office was that he was never told it existed.

In another CIA-related development, the Boston Globe reported today that British intelligence officials now "loan," rather than give, top-secret documents to the United States to avoid their being subpoenaed by Congress or U.S. courts and made public.